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S E C R E T PANAMA 000470

NOFORN
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SNAR](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: GRAY HULL OPERATION CUTS COASTAL DRUG
TRAFFICKING ROUTE

REF: A. A: PANAMA 00933/08
[1](#)B. B: PANAMA 00343

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and
(d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S//NF) "Thank you for convincing us to support this operation. It has really worked," Panamanian President Martin Torrijos told the Ambassador June 5, referring to Operation Goal Line Stance (aka Conjuntos-09). This DEA-funded maritime drug interdiction operation used JIATF-South and Panamanian National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN) assets (including four SOUTHCOM donated Nortech boats, two NAS donated interceptors) to effectively cut the Eastern Pacific littoral drug trafficking route through Panama from May 19 through June 4. The key to this operation was the GOP allowing a U.S. Navy asset, the frigate USS Gary, to patrol in and around its territorial waters (TTW) with an embarked SENAN officer coordinating with SENAN interceptor boats. The ship, stationed off the coast of Panama's Darien province, also made it difficult for FARC forces based nearby to resupply or carryout their drug and weapons trafficking operations. President Torrijos has authorized the operation to continue until June 26, and Post is working with the incoming Martinelli government to get open-ended approval to continue the operation. Vice President-elect Varela told the Ambassador on May 29 that he would support continuing the operation under the incoming government. Post strongly recommends that JIATF-S continue to deploy US assets to the area for the foreseeable future, given the demonstrated ability of the deployment to push drug traffickers away from the coastal trafficking route that is doing so much damage to our Central American partners. End Summary

Impressive Results

[1](#)2. (S//NF) As a result of Operation Goal Line Stance (GLS), U.S. and Panamanian forces: (1) intercepted two go-fasts carrying cocaine, one possibly carrying weapons (the cargo was jettisoned and sank), and two carrying illegal immigrants; (2) disrupted four go-fasts attempting to transit; (3) seized 836 kilos of cocaine; and (4) detained 16 suspects and 23 illegal immigrants. Most importantly, from

May 21 to June 4 no go-fast activity was detected in Panama's Pacific TTW. Indications are that the Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) in Colombia were aware of the presence of the U.S. and Panamanian assets, and placed a fishing boat on station to keep watch. DEA also received reports that several DTOs were getting frustrated, as multi-ton loads stacked up on Colombian beaches. The operation also involved coordination with the Colombian Navy, through TAT Colombia, and on June 6, as the operation was winding down, five go-fast boats attempted to break through. While two succeeded, three were turned around by the Gary and Colombian naval forces, and subsequently seized by the Colombians. In a conversation aboard the Gary on June 5, First VP and FM Samuel Lewis asserted that while the operation was underway, the murder rate in Panama had plummeted.

Background

13. (C) GLS was designed by JIATF-S and the SENAN, following President Torrijos' approval for a U.S. Navy asset (a "gray hull" as opposed to a USCG "white hull") to operate in Panama's TTW (see reftel B). Panama has historically resisted allowing "gray hulls" the same access to its waters that it grants "white hulls" due to sensitivities about allowing a U.S. military presence in the country (see reftel A). Torrijos was convinced to allow the operation as a test case on hearing from the Ambassador about the successful deployment of the USCGC Sherman and USCGC Hamilton off the Darien from March 15 to March 22, during which period six go-fasts were seized. In April, the Ambassador explained to

Torrijos that since three times as many "gray hulls" were available as "white hulls," a dedicated deployment would require approval for a "gray hull" operation.

Operation Goal Line Stance

14. (C) GLS involved the USS Gary and more than ten SENAN assets patrolling Panama's Pacific littorals (including at one point all four SOUTHCOM donated Nortech interceptor boats, two NAS donated interceptor boats, and a USG donated and NAS refurbished 82' vessel acting as a "mother ship" for the interceptors) from May 18 until June 7. The Gary concentrated on the area off the village of Jaque in the Darien, close to the Panama-Colombia border. SENAN assets were stationed across the Gulf of Panama. The SENAN's deployment was paid for with DEA funds, and they would not have been able to maintain their forces deployed without the assistance. Most events through the operation took place off the Darien coast, and in the future a much more modest SENAN deployment in or near the Darien should be sufficient to support U.S. assets in the area and allow for an effective deterrent. During the operation, SENAN achieved a very high level of operational efficiency, putting more boats in the water, and achieving better communications with and among them, then it has been able to do at any point in the last few years.

Pressuring the FARC

15. (S//NF) In designing GLS, a secondary intention was to put pressure on the FARC 57th Front camp near Guayabito, on the Darien coast, where 57th Front Deputy Commander Luis Fernando Mora, aka "Silver," has his base of operations. Silver runs a drug trafficking and logistics network for the FARC based on his ability to move goods up and down Panama's coasts from his beach front camp. The area of operation of the Gary was in this area, making it very hard for the FARC to move drugs, weapons and other supplies either to their camp, or into or out of Colombia. Post has received information from sensitive sources that the operation substantially impacted the ability of the FARC to conduct

drug trafficking, and that a prolongation of the naval presence could seriously impact Silver's operation.

Support of the New Administration

¶6. (S//NF) The Ambassador briefed Vice President-elect and Foreign Minister-designate Juan Carlos Varela on the success of the operation during a May 29 visit to the USNS Comfort. Varela expressed his support for continuing the operation under the incoming administration to suppress drug trafficking and to weaken the FARC in the Darien.

Visiting the Gary

¶7. (C) On June 5, Torrijos, Lewis, SENAN Director Rigoberto Gordon and the Ambassador visited the Gary to be briefed on the operation and see the Gary first hand. Following his briefing, President Torrijos praised the operation and the positive effects it was having on crime in Panama City. He noted that the view of his government was that Panama's security problems were law enforcement-related, and that this operation had demonstrated that law enforcement means were the best way to confront DTOs and the FARC. Torrijos personally thanked the crew, noting that they were protecting the U.S., Panama and all of Central America at the same time. While on board, Torrijos authorized JIATF-S to back fill the Gary with a second gray-hull until June 26. He specified, however, that he did not want to turn the country over to President-elect Martinelli on July 1 with a "gray hull" operating in Panama's TTW.

Gray-hull Guidelines

¶8. (SBU) The standing rules for gray-hulls in Panama's TTW now stand as follows: Gray-hulls may only operate regularly in Panama's TTW as part of a specific authorized operation, and should have a SENAN shiprider on board. Other gray-hulls may enter Panama's TTW on the specific request of the GOP to assist SENAN, or if they are chasing a suspect vessel into Panama's TTW, as long as they have the oral permission of the SENAN Director or his immediate subordinates as relayed to JIATF-S or USCG D-7 or D-11 by TAT Chief Panama.

Thanks/Kudos

¶9. (SBU) Post would like to thank OSD, SOUTHCOM, JIATF-South, USNAVSO, and our colleagues in the Department for their support of the short-fuse request to support Torrijos' visit to the Gary. We would also like to give kudos to the Captain, officers and crew of the Gary, including the USCG LEDET, who did a fantastic job briefing the delegation. The concern and dedication they showed to their mission was one of the key take-aways for the delegation, and placed the role of gray-hulls in counter-drug operations in just the right perspective. Congratulations and thanks to all!

Comment

¶10. (S//NF) This operation has been a great success. From a political perspective, we overcame resistance to accepting the presence of U.S. Navy vessels in Panamanian TTW - and did it with such style we earned the President's gratitude instead of resentment. It was also a home run from an operational perspective: the suppression of all drug trafficking activity in Panama's TTW for over two weeks proves that with available assets the USG and our partners can push drug trafficking away from Central America's

littoral waters. As RADM Nimmich, outgoing JIATF-S commander, told the Embassy's Country Team on January 15, the littoral drug trafficking route is so destructive of the societies of the Central American countries where it is taking place that it is putting their very stability at risk. This operation has shown that it is possible to block this route, at least with regard to Panama, by using a USN asset in close coordination with host nation assets, and with close coordination among neighboring countries. Post notes that JIATF-S has agreed to back-fill the Gary with the USS Carr, and encourages JIATF-S to consider making the deployment ongoing while Post works with the GOP to strengthen the SENAN to a point where it can take over this responsibility. However, Post notes, however, that the critical importance that sea based air assets have played in the success of this operation calls into question the likelihood that Panama will be able to take full responsibility for policing its own waters without USG support any time soon.

STEPHENSON